

# London Evening Standard

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## The playful side to painting

### EXHIBITION

#### PETER BLAKE: PORTRAITS AND PEOPLE

Waddington Custot Galleries, W1

★★★★☆☆

#### BEN LUKE

PETER BLAKE is refreshingly honest in assessing his work as a portraitist. He describes himself as a “journeyman, jobbing portrait painter who gets a good likeness and a nice picture, but in terms of great paintings, they’re not Lucian Freud, Francis Bacon or Stanley Spencer.”

This is apparent in the commissioned portraits and gifts that feature in this, his first exhibition dedicated to portraiture. They’re perfectly fine things – Blake’s a skilful draftsman and, especially when using watercolour, has a

delicate, painterly touch.

But few leap off the wall like great portraits do. Paintings of the Queen, John Peel, Eric Clapton and others capture the sitter, but don’t do much more. And when Blake copies works by Holbein and particularly Velázquez – the absolute height of portraiture – it only emphasises his own paintings’ ordinariness.

But when he balances his gifts for observation and his imagination, things begin to happen. His fictional portraits of tattooed people and wrestlers at once bring out his love of folk imagery, his innate sense of quirky British culture and his fascination with faces, and are far more playful and absorbing as a result – Blake is at his best as an image-maker.

■ Until January 30  
(020 7851 2200)

**Playful and absorbing:**  
Tattooed Woman 1

